



Article originally published on March 29, 2007. To view YAHOO! Sports online go to sports.yahoo.com.

Offense trumps defense when it comes to the Final Four

By Matt Brown

Defense wins championships, according to the football adage. Good pitching beats good hitting, most baseball experts claim.

But what about college basketball? What happens when a potent offense squares off against an elite defense? Is one strength more successful than the other a clear majority of the time?

Saturday's Final Four will provide yet another case study. And if past results hold true to form, UCLA is in trouble.

No. 1 seed Florida out of the Midwest Regional faces the second-seeded Bruins out of the West in a rematch of last year's championship game, which was won 73-57 by the Gators. The matchup is intriguing for a number of reasons, but foremost among them is the contrast in styles.

The Bruins have allowed only 50.3 points per game in the tournament. Of the schools to advance to the Final Four, only the 1985 championship team of Villanova had a better scoring defense (50.0) throughout the tournament since the field expanded to 64 that same year.

Meanwhile, Florida is averaging 84.0 points through the first four rounds -- highest among remaining teams -- as a balanced offense with all five starters returning from last year's title run has shot 52.8 percent from the field.

So, who has the advantage in this classic confrontation between an unstoppable force and immovable object?

History clearly favors the Gators.

In the era of the 64-team tournament, the highest scoring team to reach the Final Four has won the national championship 11 times in 22 years. Last year's Florida club averaged only 72.7 points during the

tournament, but that was still the highest mark of the teams to reach the semifinals.

In 2005, North Carolina was the best offensive team (84.2 ppg) and shot 51.9 percent from the floor to beat Illinois for the title.

The top defensive team, on the other hand, has run into problems, winning the title only four times: Villanova in 1985, UNLV in 1990, North Carolina in 1993 and Syracuse in 2003. That's a success rate of only 18 percent, as opposed to 50 percent for the top offensive team.

Plus, one footnote: The Runnin' Rebels of 1990 boasted the top offense and defense that season, so, for the sake of analysis, that team could be thrown out. Taking that into account, the numbers dip to 3-of-21 (14 percent) for the defense, 10-of-21 (48 percent) for the offense.

Overall, the team with the best defense is a paltry 13-18 -- 11-18 if we take out UNLV -- in the Final Four since 1985. That mark includes an eight-year span from 1994-2001 when the school with the top defense didn't win a single game. Meanwhile, the highest scoring team is a combined 26-11 (24-11 without the Rebels) over the last 22 years in those matchups.

When the top offense and top defense actually face each other in the Final Four, the higher-scoring club almost always has the upper hand. The team loaded with more offense is 7-1 over the last 22 tournaments in those contests, which include the last two championship games.

The only time the best defense in the Final Four defeated the best offense came in 2003, a semifinal matchup which didn't feature much defense at all. Syracuse allowed its most points of the

tournament, but Carmelo Anthony's career-high 33 points helped the Orange outscore Texas 95-84.

Based on those numbers, UCLA will likely need a stellar offensive effort Saturday to avenge last year's result and earn a spot in the finals. That seems unlikely, as the Bruins have only exceeded the Gators' 84.0 tournament scoring average once in 2007 -- an 85-75 win over California on Feb. 22.

Otherwise, UCLA will need to take a similar path as the eighth-seeded 1985 Villanova team, which yielded only 109 total points in the Final Four, including the 66-64 title game victory over Georgetown that ranks among the tournament's most famous upsets. To move on to that game, the Wildcats were able to hold Memphis to just 45 points in the national semifinal, something unlikely to happen to this year's Gators.

Fittingly enough, if the Bruins are able to advance, those same Hoyas may be waiting for them in the championship game Monday night. Regardless of who wins the other semifinal, however, UCLA would still have its work cut out for it: both Georgetown (76.0) and Ohio State (83.3) have significantly higher scoring averages than the Bruins (64.0).

Forced to overcome numbers like that, don't be surprised if coach Ben Howland had his team working extra hard on those jump shots this week.

Matt Brown was a research analyst for STATS LLC prior to becoming an editor. He can be reached at [mbrown\(at\)stats.com](mailto:mbrown(at)stats.com).